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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: STUDENTS BEGIN TO LOOK TO OVERSEAS
UNIVERSITIES FOR EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: There has been a new trend in college admissions this year in Turkmenistan: due to extremely limited slots and extraordinarily high bribes to get in Turkmen universities, thousands of Turkmen high school graduates are choosing to study in universities abroad. Placing students in foreign commercial universities, mainly in the former Soviet countries, has created a new industry for so-called "agents," which is both useful and profitable. Turkmen parents question the educational quality in those commercial universities due to their easy admission procedures, but believe that those colleges are still better than their Turkmen counterparts. With a growing number of people expecting Turkmenistan's private sector to expand, most believe that the risks of sending their children to overseas universities are worth doing so, since the alternatives for most high school graduates are either remaining unemployed at home or working menial jobs. END SUMMARY.

"FREE EDUCATION" IS TOO EXPENSIVE

13. (SBU) Education at Turkmenistan's universities and institutes is free of charge, except at the Turkmen-Turkish International University. Turkmenistan's education system entitles each university to have a specific quota of students. During Niyazov's era, the quota for the entire country shrank from about 15,000 to only 3,000 students per year. Although under Berdimuhamedov the number of university slots has increased (to 6,000 this year), it still offers a place to just a small fraction of the number of graduating high school students. These limited slots have given rise to a system where the size of bribes, rather than the student's intellectual ability largely decides admission, making Turkmenistan's "free education" very pricey. Ensuring one's child admission into a university or institute could cost a parent from \$15,000 to \$80,000 this year: \$15,000 for low-valued majors, such as Russian language and Russian literature, and \$80,000 for the most prestigious major -- law. Admission to the International Relations/World Economy faculty, the second most prestigious major, hovered around \$50,000. Medical majors at the Turkmen Medical Institute ranged between \$25,000 and \$30,000.

14. (SBU) Because of the extremely limited number of slots for university students and the very high cost of bribes, many middle-income parents are choosing to send their children abroad to

study, mainly to former Soviet union countries. The most popular destinations are Russia, Ukraine, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Belarus. Turkmen prospective students get admitted to fee-based universities in those countries, many of which do not have any entrance examinations or specific admission criteria. The only requirement is the timely payment of the tuition. A system of small unofficial "agencies" or "agents" have been formed in order to place Turkmen students in the universities. Their service fees range from \$1,000 to \$3,000. Basically, the function of these agencies is simply to find a university abroad, make a deal on how many students from Turkmenistan it can accept each year and work out the transportation logistics. Acknowledging this new trend, Deputy Premier for Education and Health Hydyr Saparlyev stated during an August 15 cabinet meeting that hundreds of students are now studying overseas.

UKRAINE

15. (SBU) One embassy FSN's cousin is going to a four-year university in Ukraine. His parents said that the annual tuition is \$1,000, a total of \$4,000 for four years. "Even if we have to buy him a round-trip ticket for \$1,000 once a year, the total expense for four years -- \$10,000 -- is still much more affordable than if we tried to place our son in one of the Turkmen universities," his parents claim. The agent who handles his case is working on placing a couple hundred Turkmen students in several universities in Ukraine. In addition to handling the student's admission documents, she is also providing guidance on how to obtain a Ukraine student visa and on booking airline tickets. An employee of the Ukrainian Embassy said that the volume of student visa applicants is so overwhelming that there are long lines.

ASHGABAT 00001071 002 OF 002

KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

16. (SBU) One embassy employee has tried to send her son to a four-year program at Kyrgyzstan's Osh State University. The agent who places students in that university, charges a one-time fee of \$1,000 for each student's enrollment. Tuition costs \$500. Due to the large volume of students flying abroad during the months of August and September, this particular agent worked out an alternative transportation route. Instead of using airfare, he hires several cars that convoy from Turkmenistan to Kyrgyz Republic through Uzbekistan.

QUALITY OF EDUCATION

17. (SBU) These "commercial" universities in former Soviet countries that admit students without selection examinations do raise some suspicion among parents in Turkmenistan. And, in fact, the government still does not recognize diplomas from many of these institutions. Yet, parents unwilling or unable to pay the bribes needed to send their children to Turkmen universities have little choice, and believe that even an unrecognized diploma is better than having their children sit unemployed at home or doing menial work -- the only other choices given Turkmenistan's high unemployment rate.

18. (SBU) They also have more confidence in those universities than in any Turkmen ones. For instance, an Embassy contact, who is working on sending her daughter to a Belarusian university, believes that quality of education in any foreign university is much higher than in any Turkmen university. "All students do in Turkmen institutes is dance, fill in empty spaces in conferences and state events, and create a notion of audience, instead of expanding their education" she said, expressing her discontent. These parents believe that, even if the state does not recognize their children's diplomas (leaving the children unqualified for employment in state firms or agencies), the children could still get a job in the private sector.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: We see this development driven as much by Turkmenistan's new opening to the outside world as by economics. Although Berdimuhamedov publicly stated that every child should be allowed to study anything and anywhere he/she wants, it will be

interesting to wait and see whether degrees from a foreign university will be recognized in Turkmenistan. Although \$80,000 is a gargantuan bribe for a law major, many families -- especially ministers' and agency heads' -- may believe that the bribe is worthwhile if it secures a career for their children in the upper echelons of the government. END COMMENT.

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